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(54) **PROCESS FOR OXIDATION OF A LOWER ALKANE AT LOW TEMPERATURES IN AMMONIA-CONTAINING GAS MIXTURES**

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See application file for complete search history.

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

In a process for the oxidation of a lower alkane, such as methane, over a catalyst containing Cu and one or more zeolite or zeotype materials, the oxidation is conducted in the presence of ammonia in the feed gas at a process temperature below 350° C. The oxidation can be performed in a continuous process.

15 Claims, No Drawings

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**PROCESS FOR OXIDATION OF A LOWER
ALKANE AT LOW TEMPERATURES IN
AMMONIA-CONTAINING GAS MIXTURES**

The present invention relates to a process for oxidation of a lower alkane, such as methane, in ammonia-containing gas mixtures and catalysts for use in the process. The invention is based on the finding that oxygen can be activated by mobile Cu-ammonia complexes formed inside the cavities of a zeolite. The term “lower alkane” refers to an alkane containing from 1 to 5 carbon atoms in the molecule.

Methane is the main component in natural gas and an important resource for chemicals. The current technology for the production of hydrogen and CO is by steam reforming of methane: $\text{CH}_4 + \text{H}_2\text{O} \rightarrow 3\text{H}_2 + \text{CO}$. This is an endothermic reaction that is conducted at temperatures 600-1000° C. with a high energy cost. For this reason, it is desirable to find alternative ways to exploit methane as a raw material for production of valuable chemicals. The challenge is that activation of methane with oxygen is difficult and often requires a high energy consumption.

Recently, it has been found that Cu-zeolites are able to oxidize methane directly to methanol at around 200° C. (M. H. Groothaert et al., *J. Am. Chem. Soc.* 127, 1394 (2005); P. J. Smeets et al., *Catal. Today* 110, 303 (2005), E. M. C. Alayon et al., *ACS Catal.* 4, 16 (2014); Le, H. et al., *ACS Catal.* 7, 1403-1412 (2017); Markovits, M. A. C. et al., *Top. Catal.* 59, 1554-1563 (2016)), which are very mild conditions for the activation of methane. However, the procedure for the conversion to methanol requires an activation of the Cu-zeolite which comprises exposure of the Cu-zeolite to oxygen at temperatures above 400° C. to activate the oxygen. The current interpretation of this partial oxidation of methane to methanol is that the oxidation reaction requires the formation of dimeric Cu—O species, such as Cu—O—Cu, Cu—O—O—Cu, or Cu—O₂—Cu, where the actual oxidation of methane then takes place.

A process for the direct selective conversion of methane to methanol at a temperature below 300° C., using an oxygen-activated Cu-based zeolite, is described in WO 2011/046621 A. While the methane-to-methanol conversion temperature is fairly low, the Cu-zeolite has to be pre-treated first, resulting in a cyclic process. Activation is done by heating the catalyst to about 350-750° C. in an oxidizing gaseous environment. For the actual conversion, the gaseous environment needs to be changed and cooled to the desired conversion temperature.

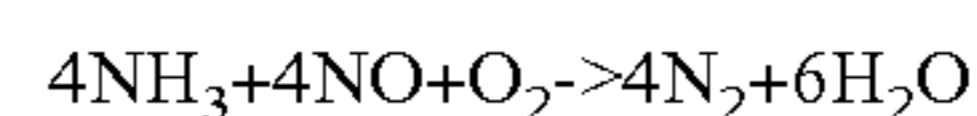
EP 3 090 997 A1 discloses a process for an isothermal conversion of methane to methanol at temperatures below 280° C., using an activated material. The process gives good yields of methanol, however this process is a discontinuous cyclic process and requires reactivation of the material after each cycle. In addition, high yields are only obtained if a high pressure of methane is applied.

CN 101985016 A discloses a catalyst preparation method and application thereof for low temperature oxidation of methane to methanol. Different amounts of air and methane are reacted batch-wise (i.e. non-continuous) in an autoclave at temperatures from 60 to 150° C. and pressures ranging from 0.5 to 2.0 MPa.

Very recently, Sushkevich et al., *Science* 356, 523-527 (2017), describe a discontinuous process where the oxidant is water instead of oxygen. One advantage of this anaerobic process is the higher selectivity towards methanol and the formation of H₂ as a valuable by-product.

Cu-zeolites are also well known catalysts for the selective catalytic reduction of NO_x by ammonia (NH₃-SCR), which

is the basis for the current technology for reduction of NO_x emissions from diesel engines and power plants. The NH₃-SCR reaction proceeds according to the equation:



According to this reaction equation, the NH₃-SCR reaction also requires an activation of oxygen. On Cu-zeolites, the NH₃-SCR reaction proceeds already around 200-250° C. (Gao, F. et al. *J. Catal.* 319, 1-14 (2014); Janssens, T. V. W. et al., *ACS Catal.* 5, 2832-2845 (2015); Paolucci, C. et al. *J. Am. Chem. Soc.* 138, 6028-6048 (2016)). As can be inferred from the reaction equation, this reaction also requires an activation of oxygen on the Cu-zeolites, which implies that oxygen activation takes place at around 200-250° C. in NH₃-SCR.

In NH₃-SCR, it has been found that the interaction between NH₃ and Cu plays a special role. Cu forms stable complexes with ammonia, such as Cu(NH₃)₄²⁺ and Cu(NH₃)₂⁺ complexes. The Cu(NH₃)₂⁺ complex is weakly bound in the zeolite (Janssens, T. V. W. et al., *ACS Catal.* 5, 2832-2845 (2015); Paolucci, C.

et al., *J. Am. Chem. Soc.* 138, 6028-6048 (2016)), which suggests that this complex is mobile under reaction conditions for NH₃-SCR.

Applicant's patent applications WO 2015/154829 A1, WO 2015/154828 A1 and WO 2015/154827 A1 describe methods for the preparation of Cu-zeolite and Cu-zeotype materials by mixing a given zeolite or zeotype material in the H⁺ or NH₄⁺ form with CuO or Cu₂O powder, followed by exposure to NH₃ or a mixture of NH₃ with nitrogen oxides at temperatures below 300° C. The materials prepared in this way show an activity for NH₃-SCR that is comparable to or exceeds the activity of materials prepared by conventional ion exchange procedures, which means that solid state ion exchange can take place between Cu oxides and zeolites at temperatures below 300° C. in the presence of ammonia. It has been proposed that the ability of performing ion-exchange at low temperatures is due to the mobility of the Cu(NH₃)₂⁺ complex (Shwan, S. et al., *ACS Catal.* 5, 16-19 (2015)). The role of the mobility for the activation of oxygen in NH₃-SCR in Cu-zeolites has not been established yet.

The above-mentioned WO 2015/154829 A1 discloses that the efficiency of the solid state ion exchange process decreases at temperatures above 350° C. Following the idea that the solid state ion exchange process is due to the mobility of the Cu(NH₃)₂⁺ complex, it can be deduced from this result that the Cu(NH₃)₂⁺ complex is not thermally stable above 350° C. This then leads to a loss of the mobility of the Cu-complex.

The present invention is built on the observations that oxidation of methane at around 200° C. requires an activation of oxygen on a Cu-zeolite or Cu-zeotype, which probably involves more than one Cu-center, and that the presence of ammonia enhances the mobility of the Cu-centers in a Cu-zeolite or Cu-zeotype.

The present invention concerns a process for the oxidation of a lower alkane over a catalyst containing Cu and a zeolite or a zeotype material at a process temperature below 350° C., wherein the oxidation is conducted in the presence of ammonia in the feed gas. The presence of ammonia is essential to the oxidation of methane on Cu-zeolite or Cu-zeotype materials, even though it does not directly take part in the oxidation of methane, and it is not necessarily a part of the reaction product. It is also noted that the process of the invention implies activation of oxygen at temperatures below 350° C., and does not require the oxygen activation

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above 400° C. as described in Le, H. et al., *ACS Catal.* 7, 1403-1412 (2017) and Markovits, M. A. C. et al., *Top. Catal.* 59, 1554-1563 (2016).

A lower alkane is a C1-C5 alkane. The preferred lower alkane is methane.

A preferred reaction product is methanol.

A first embodiment of the invention is a process in which a gas mixture comprising oxygen, ammonia and a lower alkane is contacted with a Cu-zeolite material at a temperature below 350° C., resulting in an alkane concentration in the product stream that is lower than the concentration in the inlet stream.

Another embodiment of the invention is a process in which a gas mixture comprising oxygen, ammonia and a lower alkane is contacted with a Cu-zeotype material at a temperature below 350° C., resulting in an alkane concentration in the product stream that is lower than the concentration in the inlet stream.

Another embodiment of the invention is a process in which a gas mixture comprising water, ammonia and lower alkane is contacted with a Cu-zeolite material at a temperature below 350° C., resulting in an alkane concentration in the product stream that is lower than the concentration in the inlet stream.

Another embodiment of the invention is a process in which a gas mixture comprising water, ammonia and lower alkane is contacted with a Cu-zeotype material at a temperature below 350° C., resulting in an alkane concentration in the product stream that is lower than the concentration in the inlet stream.

A further embodiment of the invention is a catalyst containing a mixture of a zeolite or a zeotype in the H⁺ or NH₄⁺ form and an oxide of Cu.

Preferably the zeolite structure of the Cu-zeolite catalyst is one or more structures selected from the group consisting of AEI, AFX, CHA, KFI, ERI, GME, LTA, IMF, ITH, MEL, MFI, SZR, TUN, *BEA, BEC, FAU, FER, MOR and LEV. It is especially preferred that the Cu-zeolite catalyst is selected from the group consisting of Cu-CHA, Cu-MOR, Cu-MFI, Cu-BEA, Cu-ZSM-5 and Cu-FER.

According to the present invention, the process feed gas mixture comprises oxygen, ammonia and a lower alkane. Other gaseous compounds, such as nitrogen, water, noble gases and other hydrocarbons, can be present in the feed gas mixture as well.

An advantage of the present invention is that the process can be conducted continuously without any need of reactivation of the Cu-zeolite or Cu-zeotype material.

Another advantage of the present invention is that the process can be conducted isothermally at a process temperature between 150 and 350° C. A preferred embodiment of the invention is a process in which the oxidation is performed at a temperature of 250° C. or lower.

A further embodiment of the invention is that the catalyst for the process comprises a mixture of a metal-free zeolite or zeotype material and an oxide of Cu.

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Another embodiment of the invention is a process in which a gas mixture comprising oxygen, ammonia and a lower alkane is contacted with a catalyst containing Cu and one or more zeolite or zeotype materials at a temperature below 350° C., in which the concentration of NH₃ is between 1 and 5000 ppmv.

Another embodiment of the invention is a process in which a gas mixture comprising oxygen, ammonia and a lower alkane is contacted with a catalyst containing Cu and one or more zeolite or zeotype materials at a temperature below 350° C., in which the concentration of oxygen is 10 vol % or lower.

Another embodiment of the invention is a process in which a gas mixture comprising water, ammonia and a lower alkane is contacted with a catalyst containing Cu and one or more zeolite or zeotype materials at a temperature below 350° C., in which the concentration of water is 10 vol % or lower.

The invention claimed is:

1. A process for the oxidation of a lower alkane over a catalyst containing Cu and one or more zeolite or zeotype materials, wherein the oxidation is conducted in the presence of ammonia in a feed gas at a process temperature below 350° C.

2. Process according to claim 1, wherein a zeolite or zeotype material is mixed with an oxide of Cu.

3. Process according to claim 1, in which the oxidation is performed in a continuous process.

4. Process according to claim 1, wherein the lower alkane is methane.

5. Process according to claim 1, wherein the reaction product is methanol.

6. Process according to claim 1, wherein the zeotype is a silico-alumino phosphate material.

7. Process according to claim 1, wherein the content of ammonia in the feed gas is between 1 and 5000 ppmv.

8. Process according to claim 1, wherein a content of oxygen in the feed gas is 10 vol % or lower.

9. Process according to claim 1, wherein a content of water in the feed gas is 10 vol % or lower.

10. Process according to claim 1, wherein the process temperature is 250° C. or lower.

11. Process according to claim 1, wherein one or more zeolite or zeotype materials in the catalyst have structures selected from the group consisting of AEI, AFX, CHA, KFI, ERI, GME, LTA, IMF, ITH, MEL, MFI, SZR, TUN, *BEA, BEC, FAU, FER, MOR and LEV.

12. Process according to claim 1 wherein the Cu-zeolite catalyst is selected from the group consisting of Cu-CHA, Cu-MOR, Cu-MFI, Cu-BEA, Cu-ZSM-5 and Cu-FER.

13. Process according to claim 11, wherein the Cu-based catalyst is Cu-CHA.

14. The process according to claim 1, wherein the one or more zeolite or zeotype materials do not require reactivation.

15. The process according to claim 3, wherein the one or more zeolite or zeotype materials do not require reactivation.

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